

CHAPTER

3

Assess What? Clear Targets

[O] ne day in third grade, Claire brought home a math test with a smiley face, a “-3,” and an “M” (for “Meets the standard”) at the top. Wanting to help her develop as a reflective thinker, Claire’s mother engaged her in the following conversation.

Mom: “Honey, this looks good. What does this tell you that you know?”

Claire, looking puzzled: “Math?”

Mom: “What about math?”

Claire: “I don’t know. Just math.”

So Claire’s mother did what any good parent would do. She went to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics website to look up the math standards. She identified which standard each problem represented, and then wrote the seven standards tested in child-friendly language so Claire could identify what specific math learning she was doing well on and what she needed to work on.

What if Claire had brought home a paper with a frowny face, a “-8,” and an “N” (for “Does not meet the standard”)? How might that conversation have gone?

Mom: “Honey, what happened here?”

Claire: “I don’t know. I don’t get it.”

Mom: “What parts don’t you get?”

Claire: “I don’t know.”

If Claire’s mother doesn’t know how to identify the standards, or learning targets, represented on this test (as, in truth, most parents don’t), she will be unable to help her daughter see, for example, that two of the seven standards gave her trouble, and that she did fine on five of them. Claire will be unable to see where she has had success in learning or to identify where her difficulties lie.

In this chapter we address the importance of learning targets to teaching, learning, and assessing. We will explain the different kinds of learning targets, how to make them clear to everyone, including students, and the connection to assessment quality. This chapter focuses on the “Assess What” portion of Figure 3.1, including its associated student-involvement considerations.

The Importance of Beginning with Targets

What is the intended learning? That one question should drive all planning and assessment in schools today. Label these learning statements “content standards,” “benchmarks,” “grade level indicators,” “grade level expectations,” “essential learnings,” “learning outcomes,” “lesson objectives,” “learning intentions,” or whatever you like; they all represent *learning targets*, or *statements of intended learning*. If we don’t begin with clear statements of the intended learning, we won’t end with sound assessments.

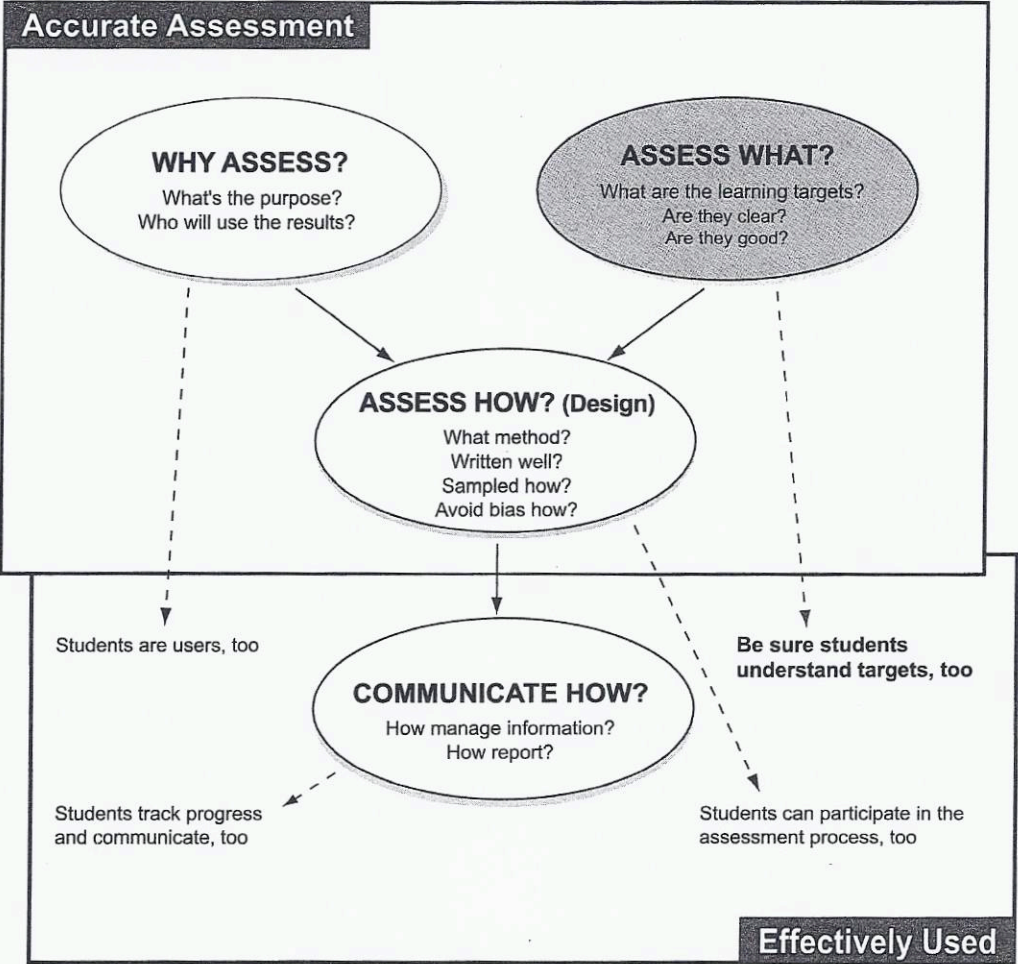
Benefits to Teachers

Know What to Assess

Beginning with clear statements of the intended learning benefits our teaching first of all. Let’s say as a part of our curriculum we have the following reading learning target: “Students will comprehend fictional, informational, and task-oriented text.” To plan lessons we will need to further define “comprehend” and we will probably want to identify the kinds of fictional, informational, and task-oriented texts we will work with this year. If our local curriculum breaks “comprehend” down into a set of subtargets such as *identifies main idea and supporting details, summarizes text, makes inferences and predic-*

tions, and uses context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words, we are much better prepared to select appropriate assessments. We won't, for example, make the mistake of assigning a project, such as "create a diorama," and then using the grade as evidence of comprehension. We will know that we need evidence of students' ability to identify the main idea, identify supporting details, summarize, and so forth to determine their level of comprehension.

Figure 3.1 Keys to Quality Classroom Assessment



Clarity on What Instructional Activities to Plan

Once we know what our learning targets are and have defined how we will assess them, we are able to think clearly about what combination of instruction and experiences will prepare students both to know what they need to know and to demonstrate their learning. This is often referred to as *intentional* teaching—all instruction and classroom activities are aimed at specified learning targets.

Ability to Balance “In Depth” with “Coverage”

It's April, just after spring break. You look at what is left to teach and the number of days left in the year and wonder how you got into this predicament again. If it's world history, twentieth-century study may boil down to three quick wars. If it's math, geometry may be reduced to a few constructions, or statistics and probability to a few games of chance. If it's language arts, poetry may get the boot. To avoid cramming large amounts of content into short periods of time, or “teaching by mentioning it” (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p. 21), teachers have to make hard choices regarding what to leave in and what to take out. A well-designed curriculum offers direction for those choices. You can use it to map out the year in advance, maximizing the chances that you will teach important concepts in depth throughout the year and get students where they need to be by the end of the year.

Know What Your Assessments Reflect at a Finer Grain

When you begin with well-defined learning targets, you are able to plan an assessment that reflects exactly what you will teach and what you expect students to learn. You will also be able to use assessments to further learning, by disaggregating the information on any assessment, learning target by learning target or standard by standard, to show areas of growth and areas needing further work. In addition, when you know which learning targets each assessment measures, you can be sure you're teaching and assessing what you, your colleagues, and your community have determined is most important for students to learn.

Accountability

Is there any reason to *not* include learning targets tested for accountability purposes in your curriculum or in your teaching? We can't think of any, and we can think of a number of reasons why this is a good idea. For one, you won't need to hire outside consultants to help you know what to focus on to improve learning for all students. You'll have that information, because with grade-level or subject learning targets aligned to the standards tested for accountability, you are able to identify from your test results which learning targets—already a part of your curriculum—will need more emphasis or a different approach. This

organization of the curriculum allows you as a building or department to be in control of your plan for maximizing student achievement, and not rely on someone else to tell you what to do.

Ability to Work Collaboratively with Other Teachers

Perhaps the most powerful benefit to teachers of having an agreed curriculum and teaching to it is the common ground it offers in working with other teachers. Schmoker (2002, p. 2) suggests the following:

The most enormous but peculiarly unsung benefit of common standards is that they provide the rich common context essential to focused, productive teacher collaboration, a sine qua non for improvement (Fullan 2000; Sparks 1998). Stated simply: If we want schools to improve, instruction—teaching lessons themselves—must improve (Stigler and Hiebert 1999). But there also must be a common set of standards. And there must be a commitment to reaching measurable achievement goals by making real adjustments to how we teach these common standards. There is no other way (Glickman 2002, 4–5).

Benefits to Students

The benefits of clear targets to students are indisputable. When we have a clear vision of where we're headed with students, we can communicate that vision to them. If you think back to the research on the effects of assessment *for* learning on student achievement, you will recall that a key feature to student success is students knowing where they are going, that is, understanding what they are to learn. As author Rick Stiggins likes to say, "Students can hit any target they can see that holds still for them." However, as in the example of Claire's math, if students have no idea what they are supposed to learn, if the only information they have is that we are doing "science" or "social studies," few of them are likely to know how to monitor their own progress and keep themselves on track.

Imagine it is the beginning of math time for a group of elementary students. Listen to this teacher:

"Okay class, take out your math books. Who remembers what we're studying? Yes, decimals. Please turn to page 145. Check your partner's book. Make sure your partner knows where we are. Everybody ready? Today we're going on a decimal hunt. Read the

directions on page 145, and then when you know what you're supposed to do, come up to the front to get your materials."

When these students go home tonight and their parents ask them what they learned in school today, they will be justified in answering, "I don't know." Their teacher has given them the subject (math), the topic (decimals), the resource (page 145) and the activity (going on a decimal hunt). What is missing? The intended learning: "We are learning to read decimals to the thousandths place and put them in order." Explaining the intended learning in student-friendly terms at the outset of a lesson is the crucial first step in helping students know where they are going.

Let us say we want students to learn to summarize text. How might we explain to fourth graders what that means? Here is a process you can use:

1. Define the word. The dictionary works well as a starting point, e.g., "*Summarize*: To give a brief statement of the main points, main events, or important ideas."
2. Rewrite the definition as an "I can" (or an "I am learning to") statement, in terms that fourth graders will understand, e.g., "I can summarize text. This means I can make a short statement of the main points or the important ideas of what I read."
3. Try it out on students or a colleague and refine as needed.
4. Have students try this process for subsequent learning goals.

Suppose we are preparing to teach seventh-grade students how to make good inferences. Our process might yield these results:

1. Word to be defined: *Inference*: A conclusion drawn from the information available.
2. Student-friendly language: "I can make good inferences. This means I can use information from what I read to draw a reasonable conclusion."

If, however, we are working with second-graders, our student-friendly language might look like this: "I can make good inferences. This means I can make a guess that is based on clues."

Shirley Clarke (2001), a British teacher and author, describes these "I can" statements as statements of the intended learning. In addition, she recommends that success criteria—statements that describe how we will know that we have learned it—be devised with students, and that they be posted, not just shared verbally. Figure 3.2 illustrates what that might look like for second graders learning to make good inferences. When teachers

Activity 3.1 Turning Learning Targets into Student-Friendly Statements

Use the process described to create a student-friendly version of this learning target:
Students will compare and contrast elements of text.

If you are working with a learning team, compare your results. How might you use “I can” statements in the classroom?

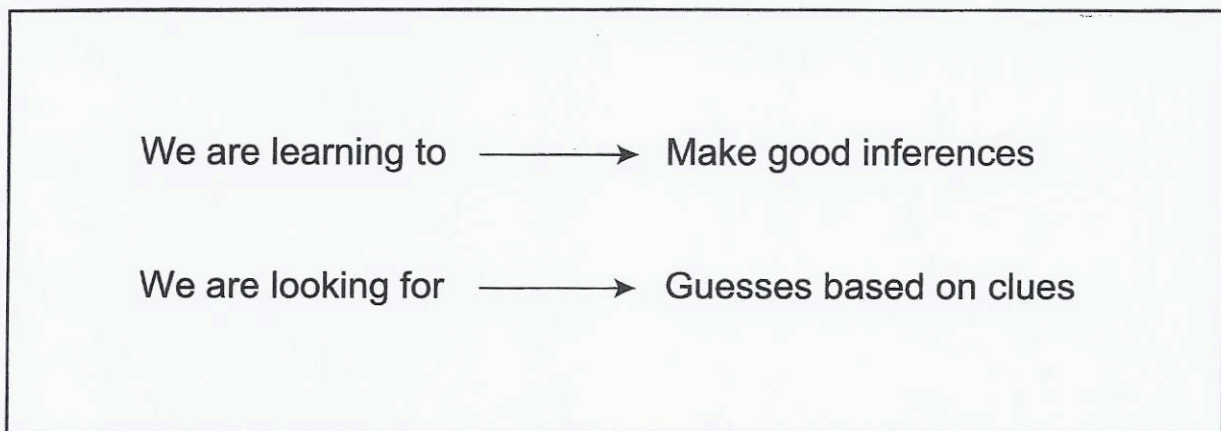
she was working with displayed learning intentions and success criteria in poster form, Clarke recounts the following anecdotal results:

All children, across the ability range, talked about the ‘learning intention’, explaining how their teacher wrote it up on a board and even giving me examples of learning intentions from that day. Brighter children said that it helped them focus on the aspect at hand and not get distracted by other things. Less able children said that they looked up at the learning intention—and especially the success criteria—to remind themselves of what they were supposed to be doing! So it has different benefits for different abilities. (Clarke, 2001, pp. 25–26)

Thinking back to the research discussed in Chapter 2, we recognize that students cannot assess their own learning or set goals to work toward without a clear vision of the intended learning. When they do try to assess their own achievement without understanding the learning targets they have been working toward, their conclusions are vague and unhelpful: “I think it was pretty good.” “I need to work harder on math.” Making targets clear to students at the outset of learning is *the* fundamental underpinning to any assessment for learning practices we will implement.

Again, think back to Claire—a good math student with only a vague idea of what she is learning. Try to interpret the feedback she has received, through her eyes: a smiley face means “this is good,” an M means “I met the standard,” and –3 means “I got three problems wrong.” “Three problems wrong, meets the standard, this is good,” but no information about what she knows or doesn’t know. Research and common sense both tell us that she could learn more with knowledge of what learning targets she is being held accountable for,

Figure 3.2 Learning Intentions



Source: Adapted from *Unlocking Formative Assessment* (p. 24) by S. Clarke, 2001, London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton.

which ones she has succeeded with, and which ones she needs to keep working on. Were she a struggling learner receiving a summary grade such as an “N” (“Does not meet the standard”), she would have no information to help her see what she has learned and what she needs to work on. Her judgment of “where am I right now?” will likely be answered with one damning word: “failing.” When students know which achievement targets they are accountable for learning, our assessments can begin to provide them with specific information about where they have succeeded and where, exactly, they have missed the mark.

Benefits to Parents

Knowing your targets at the outset of teaching also benefits parents. Sending home or posting on your website a list of learning targets written in parent-friendly language can help communicate the depth and breadth of the academic work their children are engaged in. Understanding what the intended learning is helps parents focus their assistance in productive ways. For instance, if you are teaching students how to edit their own papers and you communicate that to parents, you can ask that they not do the editing for their children. If you are working on map-reading skills, you can suggest that parents have their children practice using a map to give directions on a car trip. However, if you are asking students to complete a “Pet Project,” and that title alone is all the information parents receive, they will be unlikely to know what they can (and shouldn’t) do to support the intended learning.

Additionally, being clear about the intended learning helps parents understand what grades mean in terms of what their children have and have not learned. When grades come home, parents can talk specifically with their children about their strengths and areas for improvement, and help them avoid damaging generalizations, such as, “I’m no good at reading.”

Clear Targets

All of these benefits are predicated on the existence of statements of learning that are clear and usable. One way you will know that you have clear and usable targets is if you can determine what kind of learning target is being called for. We offer a categorization framework that identifies five kinds of learning targets: knowledge, reasoning, skills, products, and dispositions. These categories will become especially useful in Chapter 4 when we determine which method we should use to assess intended learning.

Knowledge Targets

Knowledge targets represent the factual underpinnings in each discipline. They are often stated using verbs such as *knows*, *lists*, *names*, *identifies*, and *recalls*. Examples include, “identifies antonyms, synonyms, and common homonyms,” “knows multiplication facts to 10,” “recalls details from a story,” “capitalizes book titles, abbreviations, and proper nouns correctly,” “knows the nutritional value of different foods” (Kendall & Marzano, 1997, p. 552). Knowledge targets also call for procedural knowledge, knowing how to do something. They often begin with the phrase *knows how to* or the word *uses*, such as “uses scientific notation to represent very large and very small numbers.”

Beyond knowing things outright, there is another way of knowing—knowing via reference. Not everything that we need to know needs to be “by heart.” What, of the information students need, will we require they memorize, and what will we teach them to find? Will they memorize the list of prepositions (above, aboard, about . . .)? Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division facts? The table of periodic elements? The capitals of the 50 U.S. states? As we know, there is not enough time to teach (or for students to learn) everything of importance—we can easily fill the year’s teaching time with important things students need to know, thereby losing instructional time for learning targets beyond the knowledge level. Where is the balance? One way to address this problem in part is to determine which knowledge learning targets students will be required to know outright and which they will be required to know via reference. It is an exercise in professional judgment, best conducted with a group of colleagues.